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ABSTRACT

This essay highlights one pregnant middle school teacher's experiences with taking a mid-year leave. She used entries from her personal diary to reflect on how she felt about her leave, while her students wrote letters and notes expressing their anxieties about her leaving. The discussion of planning a pregnancy and the stages of pregnancy, along with the many life changes that she experienced, were supported in the literature (e.g., essays, books, and journals). The teacher discovered that many people experienced similar feelings of guilt about leaving students mid-year and that the difficulty in finding an adequate mid-year replacement was not unique to her experience. The essay presents information on mid-year leave, finding a substitute teacher, childcare needs and family leave, separation anxiety among teachers and students, and the impact of the attacks of September 11, 2001. (SM)

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# Pregnancy, Teaching, and Leaving Before Years End

By

Jamila Abdulrashid

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Title - Pregnancy, Teaching, and Leaving Before Years End

Jamila Abdulrashid

Abstract

This essay is an account of my experience as a pregnant teacher of middle school children who had to take a mid-year leave. I used my personal daily journal writings to reflect on how I felt about my leave, while the children wrote many letters and notes that expressed their anxieties toward my leaving. The discussing of planning and the stages of pregnancy along with the many life changes that I was about to endure were supported through varied forms of literature including but not exclusive to essays, books, and journals. I also covered how the events of 911 affected my opinion about mid-year leaves. What I discovered was that many people went through similar feelings of guilt about leaving students mid-year and that unfortunately the difficulty in finding adequate replacements was not unique to my experience.

Being pregnant is a challenge to the body and mind. Combine that with teaching and having to leave your students mid-year and it is a formula for a great deal of misgivings. This essay was written to help me and others understand how and why mid-year leaves due to pregnancy have such an impact on students, teachers, and ultimately society.

**Stages of Pregnancy**

There are three trimesters in pregnancy. The first trimester are months one through three. The second trimester are months four through six and the third trimester are months seven through ten. Although most people think that pregnancy is nine months long it is actually forty weeks or ten months in length. Each trimesters brings it's own set of changes to the mind and body. In the first trimester pregnant women may experience some or all of these symptoms fatigue, frequent urination, vomiting, nausea, heartburn, food cravings, changes to the breast, constipation headache faintness or dizziness and tight clothing. (Eisenberg, Murkoff, & Hathaway, 1996, p.102-103, 119-120,134-135). In my

first trimester fatigue was my biggest obstacle. I was tired all the time. There were days that my eyes were so crossed I don't know how I made it to work or graduate school. Being a sixth grade math teacher, a graduate student and pregnant was quite a challenge. My first three months were filled with fatigue, frequent urination, nausea, heartburn, full tender breast, and mood swings. Also, my eating habits changed immediately. "If you're well-nourished, you are much more likely to have an "easy pregnancy."" (Eisenberg, Murkoff, & Hathaway, 1986, p. 20). According to the book What to eat when you're expecting and most obstetricians, ideally pregnant women's target weight gain should be between 25 – 35 pounds. (p.23) I'm sure that the good eating habits I developed during my pregnancy helped to keep my weight gain to 22 pounds. It has also helped me to continue to eat healthy even after pregnancy. I began to crave foods that I either seldom ate or never ate before. I craved vegetables big time, and I seldom ate them before. It became very important to me to have a well-balanced meal at each sitting and vegetables are a big part of complete nourishment. Another food that I could not stomach before pregnancy was bananas. I began to eat one almost every morning, which is something I never ate before becoming pregnant. Good eating habits and fatigue were the biggest changes I endured in my first trimester.

By the second trimester, pregnant women may experience some of the same physical symptoms from the first trimester. Some new symptoms could include, a decrease in urination, nausea and vomiting, nasal congestion, occasional nosebleeds, ear stuffiness, bleeding gums, increase in appetite, joint and face swelling, fetal movement and backache. While emotionally you start the trimester feeling scatterbrain and could end it with fewer mood swings and some anxiety about the future. Your monthly doctor visits will include

checking your weight and blood pressure, urine for sugar and protein, the fetal heartbeat, hands and feet for swelling, any unusual symptoms along with addressing all of your questions and concerns. (Eisenberg, Murkoff, & Hathaway, 1996, p.150-151, 170-171,199-200). By my fourth month I could feel the baby's heart beat by placing my hand on my uterus. I also still had all of the symptoms from my first trimester except for fatigue. Surprisingly I had my energy back. In my second trimester I began to see my stomach grow and it excited me to know that I was producing life. While my energy level increased, the speed at which I moved along with my equilibrium decreased. I lost my balance easily. I no longer had food cravings; healthy eating became my way of life. By the end of my fourth month and the beginning of my fifth month my stomach began to feel heavy, to the point that I started to have difficulty walking. My doctor's recommended that I get a belly belt to support and lift the baby and improve my walking, or I might have to stop working. Determined not to stay home I got the belt. It helped for a while, but as I gradually got bigger the less it helped. By the end of my second trimester I was six months pregnant, unable to see my toes or fit in most of my clothes, and unfortunately in more pain and discomfort then ever. The baby's position made for very toilsome functioning conditions. Sleeping, walking, sitting, and standing were often painful and I was urged once again to stay home. As a teacher I went through feelings of guilt when faced with the decision of bed rest. On the one hand I felt guilty for leaving my students and on the other I felt guilt for not staying home sooner. My decision was difficult, however, it became painfully obvious the choice I had to make and I decided that February 15, 2001 would be my last day of work. The middle of my third trimester would start my bed rest.

In the third and final trimester your doctor routinely checks all vital signs as s/he did in the two trimesters, however, by the eighth and ninth months s/he also checks the cervix for dilation. Physically and emotionally your symptoms are primarily the same, however, you may also experience increased backache, joint swelling, and urination along with more fetal activity, hemorrhoids, difficulty sleeping, excitement, anxiety and fantasizing about the baby. (Eisenberg, Murkoff, & Hathaway, 1996, p. 214-215,233-234,256-258). In my third trimester many of the symptoms from the first trimester returned. So, my fatigue and tender breast came back and coupled with my heavy stomach wiped me out for the last leg of my pregnancy. From your first to eighth months of pregnancy doctor visits are once a month. Next, you go every two weeks, after thirty-four weeks of pregnancy, for a month. Then you visit the doctor every week for the last month of pregnancy. I never even made it to my two-week visits. My daughter was born at thirty-four weeks, six weeks early. At thirty-four weeks the lungs of a baby are not fully developed and there is a chance that the baby will need the aid of a respirator until they are able to breathe properly on their own. However, my child was born healthy and with full lung capacity, so she did not need a respirator not did she have to stay in the hospital due to low birth weight as she was 5 lbs. 8oz. I was very happy that she was okay to go home and that she was healthy. Above all else parents want to have a healthy baby, and I did.

**Planning of Pregnancy**

Planning a family around a career is never easy and often impossible. Many couples choose to plan pregnancies based on job promotions, the month they want their child born, vacations, and childcare availability. For many teachers planning a pregnancy

around vacation is the most important. Many teaching institutions frown upon expectant mother because it may obstruct the learning process. Therefore, many teachers plan their pregnancies around vacation as not to disrupt the flow of academic preparation. However, if a mid-year leave is necessary, it is vital that expectant mothers inform the administration as early as possible so that preparations can be made for finding an adequate replacement. According to R. O'Reilly (1979 p. 5) "boards are entitled to substantial advance notice of an impending pregnancy leave, and that lead time must be sufficient to protect continuity of instruction." Unfortunately, my pregnancy was totally unplanned. I had many concerns when I found out that my child was due at the end of April. For instance, I was concerned about childcare and the effects on my students due to my mid-year leave.

**Mid-year Leave**

During my research I learned that the most frequent reason teachers took mid-year leaves was maternity. (Alfred; Smith, 1982, p. 9) Taking a medical/maternity leave mid-year is never an easy choice for a dedicated teacher concerned about her students. When I found out I was pregnant I promptly began to calculate when I would needed to take my leave. I felt an instant sense of relief when I realized that I could leave at the beginning of April. With the school year four fifths of the way complete I didn't feel so badly. However, I also felt some anxiety because I was leaving right before the citywide math exam, and I was concerned about how my students would perform without my support and guidance. Much to my dismay my leave came two months earlier than expected due to complications. Actually, I should have left in early January rather than the middle of February. I was advised that I might have to go on bed rest in the middle of my second

trimester, because the baby was very low. The initial discomfort made it difficult for me to walk. The discomfort quickly turned to pain in early January and made walking, standing and lying down very awkward, even after I purchased a special belly belt harness to lift my stomach. The level of suffering increased as the baby grew; therefore it became obvious that bed rest was inevitable. After pushing myself too far in the middle of January I informed my principal that February 15, 2001 would be my last day. This gave him three weeks to find a substitute for me to work with so my students would not lose continuity. This would give the best opportunity at continued academic success.

Despite the adequate warning a substitute was not sent until a week prior to my leave. The students knew the replacement that was assigned to my class because he was a substitute in the school for many years, unfortunately the children did not respect him and this was known by the administration. This more than annoyed me. My irritation was a direct result of my administration's lax attitude towards finding a sufficient proxy. I informed them early on of my pregnancy and continually asked about my replacement only to be dismissed with little or no regard to my concerns, which is probably the reason I worked longer than I should have. These actions or lack thereof caused me to put my unborn child's health at risk. Luckily for me I left when I did because exactly one month after I went on bed rest (March 15,2002) my water broke and I was hospitalized for four days before my healthy daughter was born. While things worked out fine for my daughter and I the question still remains, could my premature delivery and the subsequent failure of my students been avoided?

**Finding a Substitute**

Unfortunately, when you work in the educational system society feels that being a teacher means your are suppose to put the needs of others peoples children ahead of your own. The board of education and many principals seem to frown on women who become pregnant. "Many principals found pregnancies "incredibly inconvenient," didn't like the disruption when substitutes came in mid-year, and frowned on the shorter hours that young mothers kept." (Education Weekly.com (May 12, 1999). I do not completely disagree because unfortunately substitutes are often disrespected and disruptive to the system. However, if every teacher was trained properly and society gave teachers the respect that they deserve children would not become as disruptive or disrespectful and the education process would continue without a problem.

Early in my pregnancy I spoke to my principal about finding a replacement. He told me he would find someone ASAP to work with me in order to keep my routine with the students going and for the substitute to become familiar with the student population. Since I was due at the end of April I planned to work until the Easter break which was April 8, 2002 and expressed interest in my substitute as early as December in preparation for my students continued academic success. Unfortunately, bed rest was necessary. I then began to pursue my replacement earnestly and I told my supervisor of the possibility of an early leave. He did not take my concerns seriously nor did he express any regard for the students. I pushed myself to stay at work, sadly the position of the baby and the pain became too much and I had to stop working. Unfortunately the person chosen as my replacement only observed my routine two times in a four week period, and stayed in my room all of about forty-five minutes each time. Which means he only got to see me with

one third of my student population. To make matters worse we did no articulating about my routine, approach, or the students. Needless to say I felt horrible about leaving my students in the hands of a teacher who was not prepared, and wondered why a suitable replacement was not found. Why did these students get the short end of the stick? Did the district office know about my leave, and if so what was their part in all of this? How much did they want my children to succeed without a worthy substitute? Did this happen because I worked in an area with low social-economic background? So, who is at fault for the failure of these students the system, the principal, society, or me for having an unplanned pregnancy?

**Childcare Needs/ Family Leave**

Childcare is a very important aspect of raising a family. Deciding whether to stay home or find a childcare provider parents have big decisions to make when choosing to have children. During my pregnancy there was an ongoing debate as to whether I would stay home or go back to work. It has always been my desire to stay home and raise my children. I don't trust any one to raise my child, besides it is a task that I want and am delighted to have. Luckily for me I have been able to stay home with my child. It's the greatest joy I have ever known. While I miss teaching school aged children I hope that I will be able to continue to stay home with my daughter. Although the board of education doesn't provide the best or most complacent conditions for pregnant teachers, if you are an appointed teacher you can take a family leave to stay home with your child whether this child is naturally born to you, adopted of a foster child.

According to the United Federation of Teacher in New York City an appointed teacher (male or female) can take a family/childcare leave without pay up to the

September after the child's fourth birthday (UFT Agreement, Article 19b; 2000). You can even come back to work and if any reason arises and you need to go out on a family leave you can, as long as it is within the four-year time frame. You have job security. Fortunately for me, I am able to make a decision about childcare needs based on the requirements and guidelines of the United Federation of Teacher's family leave and my desire to stay home with my daughter.

**Separation Anxiety of Teacher/Students**

I wanted a child's perspective on a teacher leaving mid-year so, I asked my students to write down their reaction on the subject of me leaving. They were more than happy to share their feelings. From class to class the responses were primarily the same. Their replies were sentimental and touching. The most common response was 'congratulations on the baby. I wish you did not have to leave me because you are my favorite teacher.' Which was a statement that I was surprised to read especially since they always complained about me giving them too much work. Other sentiments included 'good luck and I hope the baby is healthy and come back to work soon. Bring the baby.' One of my favorite responses came from a girl who at the beginning of the school year really struggled with math. I noticed her problem and gave her help however it was not enough. Initially she was a bit apprehensive about asking for extra help. She was not responsive to my assistance, but once she opened herself up to accepting help her confidence increased and her grades began to soar. She wrote " thank you for all your help with my math. No teacher ever taught me like you. You helped me and made me work hard and I feel good. I wish you didn't have to leave, but I know you are having a

baby. I hope you come back soon because I don't want to fail. I know I'm going to fail because you are leaving and no one is like you. Love your student." Her letter touched me like no other letter did. It made me want to continue working just for her. While I was sad that I must leave, each day of my last week bought on increased anxiety about staying.

There is a special relationship that exist between a teacher and students and when that bond is severed there is bound to be feelings of anxiety. Teaching to this point was a part of my life for fifteen years and now I was about to become a parent and there was a certain amount of fear that I experienced. My qualm was not limited to my concerns of motherhood; they included my regard for my students. I love, respect and want only the best for them and I was worried about their futures. To my surprise, and although they didn't always show it, my students were just as concerned about my baby and me. Many of the students I taught this year I taught for two years in a row. One year as their fifth grade teacher and now as their sixth grade math teacher. So, we know one another pretty well. For example on one day, towards the end of my working I had a great deal of trouble walking and one of my students said "Ms. Abdulrashid when you can't walk, just stay home, okay don't come in." He shook his head and mumbled something about how bad I looked. He was right, I looked as bad as I felt. Several students expressed their feelings to me in regards to my pregnancy and me leaving school in the middle of the year. Some of them told me stories of their younger siblings and of their mother's pregnancies. I received great many congratulations, get well soon, gifts and I'll miss you from my students. Some children expressed their hope for the sex of my child and wished me good luck. But the most touching sentiments were those that thanked me for caring and

teaching them. It felt good to know that they cared, at the same time it saddened me to leave knowing that "my" children wanted me to stay.

Each day of my last week bought on increased anxiety, however, once Friday February 15, 2002 arrived I was tired and could not wait to leave. For a couple of weeks after my leave I got word that the students asked about me as I asked about them, but slowly and surely all of our feeling mellowed and life went on. It's nice to know that the concern I felt for them they also felt for me.

**September 11, 2001 (911)**

I included my feeling about the events of September 11, 2001 because I realized how fast life changes, and change can be a frightening thing. In the blink of an eye I found out that I was pregnant, before I knew it I would have to leave my students for a life of motherhood, and the World Trade Center (WTC) was bombed. The pain my students felt about their loved ones at the WTC I felt and it made me realize how attached I was to these wonderful young people. Motherhood scared me almost as much as the terrorist bombing did because the future for my child, my students and society was so uncertain one could only hope that the events of 911 would not adversely dictate the path for our futures

It started out as an ordinary day. It was extremely warm in my classroom even with both fans blowing. At about 8:45 a.m., the end of homeroom, the bell rang and my first period class came. We followed our regular daily routine. Then at 9:30 a.m. the bell rang to begin the second period. As the students changed classes my second period class lined up outside my door. When one boy said " Ms. A did you hear about the terrorist?" I thought that he was learning about terrorist in his previous class so I replied "yeah, yeah

okay it is math time now so go inside take out your homework and begin your journal then continue with the aim for today." Many of the children were buzzing about terrorist. I politely ignored them, calmed them down and started my lesson, having no ideas what was really going on in our city. Halfway through the class the inter school phone rang. It was the main office asking for one of my students to report downstairs to go home. Still I had no idea what was going on. I continued to teach my class and the children are all doing their work. A coworker passes by my door and calls me to the hallway and tells me that a plane has crashed into the side of the World Trade Center (WTC) and not by accident this was an act of terrorism. Shocked and somewhat confused I tried to remain calm and continue teaching my class. I did not want the children to be alarmed or frightened. Now the class is three fourths of the way done and two school aides come to my door and without saying excuse me interrupt my class by yelling out the names of students and said "your mother is downstairs you are going home! Ms. Abdulrashid did you hear about the terrorist bombing the WTC? That's why these children are going home." Now all the children are in an uproar. Many of them become very anxious and scared. Some of them had the look of terror on their faces. At this time a few of them said to me "this is what we were trying to tell you when we first came to class!" At this time I said, "I thought they were learning about terrorist in your last class. I did not know about the attack on the WTC." Every minute either the phone rang or some one cane to the door requesting that a child come to the office to go home with a parent. Some children expressed their fear knowing that a parent, friend or family member worked at the WTC. Before the class was over most of my students had gone and the ones that were left were very scared and wondered where their parents were. At 10:15 a.m. the bell rang

signaling the end of the period, and the hall was brimming with students and faculty all engrossed in piercing conversation about the recent events in our city.

I decided to go to the teacher's lounge to watch the television and see what was going on. On my way, parents that knew me asking for help in finding their child stopped me. So, at seven and a half weeks pregnant, just one week after being released from bed rest due to some slight bleeding, I began to run up and down the stairs looking for children in order to calm down the alarmed parents that smothered the hallways. I did this for approximately thirty-five minutes. Now a bit tired I made my way to the lounge overwhelmed and dismayed, the first thought I had once I actually realized what was going on was how could I bring a child into this world? Then I thought what about all the people who already have children in this world, the parents of my students what are they feeling and thinking? My head hurt and so did my heart. I could not get my mind off of my unborn child wondering whether or not it was f air to bring a child into a world where people have such contempt for one another.

Furthermore, when I found out that the people responsible for the terrorist attack shared the same religious beliefs that I do I felt immediate disgrace. Islam is a religion that glorifies peace so how, and why did these people dishonor their, my religion with this act of terrorism? What am I going to tell my child about the people who performed the worst attack on our city, country and state of mind in history? How do I explain that while we practice the same religious these horrible people that we don't share their views? When I got home, in Westchester county, that afternoon all I could do was lay down, rub my belly and cry out of fear, shame and raging pregnancy hormones. While I was worried about the friends and family that worked in that area I could not help but feel relieved that I

worked in the Bronx and not in Manhattan. I was unable to go into Manhattan for three and a half months. I still have not gone down to Ground Zero and I doubt that I ever will.

In concluding, I realized that all of the fears and concerns that I had while teaching and pregnant were not uncommon of the feelings that other pregnant teachers have. My research proved that the way teachers and students are treated by the system is not exclusive to the city that I live in or to me. Unfortunately, for our children, society at large, and our way of life the lives of the young and their success is not as important to society as they would like us to believe. If children are our future, then society needs to treat them and the women who give birth to them with much more respect. If all teachers were trained properly I do not believe mid-year leaves would be such taboo, because the bottom line would be preserved, the success of our children.

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